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SUBJECT: FARC DEMOBILIZATION OF 70: LANDMARK EVENT OR
TELENOVELA?

Summary

¶1. On March 7 the GOC announced the demobilization of 70 FARC guerillas and an airplane. As the largest FARC defection in Colombia, s 40-year conflict, symbolically occurring in the insurgency's birthplace, the event was initially hailed as historic. However, within days questions emerged which remain unanswered about the veracity of the demobilization. End Summary.

GOC Announces FARC Demobilization

¶2. On March 7, Peace Commissioner Restrepo and Army Commander General Montoya presided over the demobilization of 70 FARC guerillas said to be of the Cacica la Gaitana company of the FARC, s Joint Central Command in Tolima. This was seen as a core FARC unit located near where the insurgency was founded and said to have regular contact with the ideological leader and Secretariat member Alfonso Cano. Early reports stated that, along with their weapons, the guerillas surrendered a plane which had been acquired for use in their erstwhile demilitarized zone (despeje). Later in the day, Polcouns crossed paths with Restrepo at the Ministry of Defense. Restrepo was warmly congratulated by senior military officials passing by.

Repudiation and Regret

¶3. In a communique presented at the demobilization ceremony, the unit's political commander, alias "Biofilo," repudiated the conflict, which he said had exhausted his country and converted it into a vast cemetery. His unit was laying down its arms, he said, in regard for thousands of innocent victims of "doubtful interests and wretched practices." Biofilo stated that the unit renounced war but not its Leninist and Bolivarian principles. The war, he said, had degraded those founding goals and diminished the rebels as human beings. Detailing cases of FARC atrocities against civilians, including some ostensibly attributed to the army, he rebuked the FARC for exercising only coercive power and no constructive influence over the territories it has dominated, alienating itself from the very population it had set out to defend. Biofilo closed by expressing his support for the peace negotiations recently entered into by the Marxist guerilla organization the ELN.

Questions Surface....

¶4. Inaccurate statements made by the Army subsequently cast doubt on the event. First, it emerged that the unit's leader, alias Saldana, had been a prisoner in state custody for two years, and FARC sources pointed to another man, alias Marlon (still at large), as the unit's true commander. The Army admitted these facts but stressed that Saldana was a leader who convinced the others to surrender. Second, it was revealed that the plane had been in government custody since ¶2003. Saldana claimed, however, that the plane did belong to his company and had been intended for use on an assault on Bogota. President Uribe, who had highlighted the original plane story to the press, was obliged to issue a retraction.

.... and Doubt Grows

¶5. As journalists probed further into the story, further contradictions emerged. It was revealed that Saldana was a FARC deserter who was captured and imprisoned in 2004. To shorten his sentence, he contacted Restrepo offering to turn informer and bring in his comrades. His men claim to belong to a unit which they say was created (conveniently) near the time of Saldana's offer. The existence of the Gaitana unit not only has been denied by the FARC, but also is not recognized by the Colombian police, the Departmental government, or even the Army's own records of the FARC. A journalist visiting the demobilized in detention reported that some seemed to be genuine guerillas, others hangers-on. Conflicting versions of the unit's area of operation planted

the notion that this could be a hodgepodge of deserters assembled into a unit for the purpose of demobilization. At the event, the men wore clean new uniforms and appeared fresh, while claiming to have hiked long distances to arrive at the site.

Comment

¶6. Despite all of the holes in the official story, discontent in FARC ranks could in truth be growing. Due to the confusion over details, however, the significance of the event remains unclear.

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